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## From zero to hero

March 6, 2011

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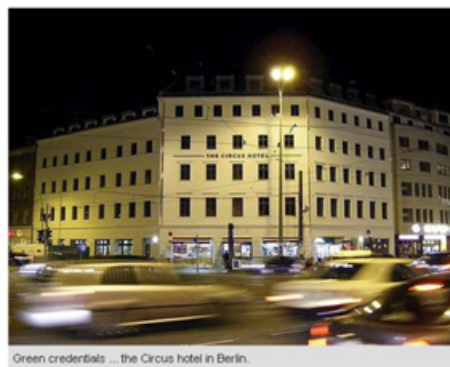
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Green credentials ... the Circus hotel in Berlin.

### Don't be fooled by the lack of a star rating at these trendy Berlin digs, writes Alison Stewart.

IS THIS too good to be true? A Berlin hotel with zero stars wins a place in Trip Advisor's 2011 Travellers' Choice awards categories, including the top 25 German hotels and the top 10 trendiest hotels in Europe?

In award lists jam-packed with five-star luxury accommodation, the humble Circus, with its green credentials, comes in at No. 2 of all German hotels and is the 10th-trendiest hotel in Europe. Trip Advisor ranks it the third best of 644 Berlin hotels. What, exactly, are they doing right?

The hotel's "green, ethical and sustainable approach" sounds a trifle worthy. No minibar, no gym, no swimming pool, no underground car park, no airconditioning, no toiletries in rooms. The general manager of the hotel, Katrin Schöning, says this is why the Circus has no stars - it has chosen not to be assessed for a star rating to avoid compromising principles.

The thought crosses my mind that I may well be embarking on a self-flagellating exercise where luxuries are exchanged for a glowing sense of moral rectitude.

It is, therefore, with some trepidation that I head to Rosenthaler Platz, on the edge of Berlin's bustling central Mitte district. The elegant, newly renovated building on the south-west corner of the platz has a rich, sometimes tragic history, but more of that later.

Carolyn, one of the staff on reception, which is open 24 hours, embodies the hotel's hospitable, inclusive approach, welcoming us "in the manner we [staff] would like to be welcomed".

What comes across, from the receptionists to Schöning to the hotel's five owners, is their pride in Berlin and their belief that travel should be defined by experience, not price.

One of the owners, Christian Goepfert, says: "In our 20s we built the Circus hostel across the platz. At the end of our 30s, the hotel was the logical next step.

"It reflects our commitment to hospitality that is human without being formal."

The hotel says it isn't interested in squeezing the last euro out of guests. Prices range from €80 to €100 (\$109 to \$135) for a double (as opposed to an average of between €200 and €300 for a good Berlin hotel) and, with the exception of New Year's, are the same in August as in February.

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